

Message Text

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TAGS: PINT, PDEV, UK
SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: SCOTTISH REACTION

REF: (A) LONDON 3109 (B) LONDON 4319

SUMMARY. EMBOFFS MET WITH MEMBERS OF THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP), SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY (SLP), LABOR PARTY AND OTHER OBSERVERS OF THE SCOTTISH POLITICAL SCENE DURING A TRIP TO EDINBURGH, GLASGOW AND PERTH MARCH 9 - 13 TO ASSESS POLITICAL CLIMATE IN SCOTLAND IN THE WAKE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S DEFEAT ON THE DEVOLUTION TIMETABLE MOTION. WHILE THE GENERAL REACTION TO THE GOVERNMENT'S DEFEAT WAS NOT AS DRAMATIC AS EXPECTED -- INDEED OUTWARD MANIFESTATIONS WERE HARDLY DISCERNIBLE -- THE SNP APPEARS TO BE CONTINUING ITS GAINS AT THE EXPENSE OF THE NATIONAL PARTIES. THE SNP EXPECTS TO DO WELL IN UPCOMING LOCAL ELECTIONS AND IS CONFIDENT OF PICKING UP A NUMBER OF SEATS IN ANY GENERAL ELECTION. THE SLP, BESET WITH MEMBERSHIP AND FUNDING PROBLEMS, IS STRUGGLING TO HOLD ITS OWN. POSSIBLE ELECTION SCENARIOS SUGGEST SNP QAINS OF 10 - 20 SEATS, MOSTLY AT THE EXPENSE OF LABOR, BUT THE LIBERALS ARE ALSO VULNERABLE. END SUMMARY.
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1. THE APPARENT COLLAPSE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S DEVOLUTION BILL HAD BEEN EXPECTED TO ROUSE STRONG FEELINGS AMONG THE SCOTS AND TRIGGER DRAMATIC SHIFTS IN PARTY SUPPORT (REF. A). POLL DATA PUBLISHED SINCE THE DEFEAT OF THE CLOTURE MOTION HAS BEEN CONTRADICTORY. A SUNDAY MAIL OOLL SUGGESTED THE SNP HAD GAINED A SUBSTANTIAL LEAD OVER THE

OTHER PARTIES, WHILE A GLASGOW HERALD "SYSTEMS THREE" POLL RELEASED MARCH 9 INDICATED NO EROSION OF SUPPORT FOR LABOR, CONSERVATIVE GAINS AND A DROP IN SNP POPULARITY. BOTH POLLS ARE OF QUESTIONABLE RELIABILITY AND DO LITTLE TO CLARIFY THE SITUATION. DISCUSSIONS WITH A VARIETY OF PARTY MEMBERS AND POLITICAL OBSERVERS SUGGEST THAT THE EXPECTED "SCOTS BACKLASH" FROM THE COLLAPSE OF THE DEVOLUTION BILL HAS NOT MATERIALIZED. NO PERSUASIVE THEORIES FOR ITS ABSENCE WERE ADVANCED.

2. WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S FAILURE TO DELIVER ON DEVOLUTION, AT LEAST FOR NOW, IT IS GENERALLY HELD THAT THE POLITICAL INITIATIVE IN SCOTTISH POLITICS IS IN THE HANDS OF THE SNP. DISCUSSIONS WITH SNP SENIOR VICE-CHAIRMAN MARGO MACDONALD AND PARTY THEORETICIAN STEPHEN MAXWELL REFLECTED THE FEELING THAT THE PARTY HAD "COME OF AGE", AS WELL AS A STRONG FEEL OF CONFIDENCE IN THE SNP'S FORTUNES IN FUTURE ELECTORAL STRUGGLES. THOUGH LARGELY A ONE-ISSUE PARTY, THE SNP HAS ATTEMPTED TO WORK OUT POSITION PAPERS ON A VARIETY OF SCOTTISH ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS. IN THEIR ASSESSMENT OF THE GENERAL POLITICAL SITUATION IN SCOTLAND AND WESTMINSTER, SNP CONTACTS REFLECTED A GROWING DEGREE OF POLITICAL SAVVY AND SOPHISTICATION WHICH SUGGESTS THAT THE PARTY IS MATURING QUICKLY.

3. SCOTLAND'S OTHERHOME-BASED PARTY, THE SLP, IS STRUGGLING FOR SURVIVAL. THE SLP NOW HAS TWO SEATS IN PARLIAMENT, HELD BY JIM SILLARS AND JOHN ROBERTSON, WHO WERE BOTH LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ELECTED AS LABOR CANDIDATES. A SLP SPOKESMAN ESTIMATED CURRENT PARTY MEMBERSHIP AT AROUND 2,000 MEMBERS AND NOTED THAT FINANCIAL PROBLEMS HINDER THE SLP'S GROWTH AND SCOPE OF ITS ACTIVITIES. ITS OCTOBER 1976 PURGE OF EXTREME LEFTIST ELEMENTS WAS ALSO DAMAGING. WHILE THE PARTY ENJOYED SIGNIFICANT MEDIA COVERAGE AT FIRST, IT HAS DECLINED OF LATE. WITH ITS LIMITED RESOURCES, THE SLP WOULD ONLY BE ABLE TO CONTEST 5 - 6 SEATS IN A GENERAL ELECTION. THE PARTY'S FORTUNES ARE CLOSELY TIED TO THOSE OF SILLARS. STILL A POPULAR FIGURE IN SCOTTISH POLITICS. IF HE IS ABLE TO RETAIN HIS SEAT AS A SLP CANDIDATE, THE PARTY COULD HOPE TO GAIN MORE STRENGTH IN THE FUTURE AS SCOTLAND'S "SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE" TO THE SNP. IF HE IS DEFEATED, THE SLP MAY WELL COLLAPSE.

4. THE FIRST REAL TEST OF THE SCOTTISH POLITICAL CLIMATE AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE DEVOLUTION BILL WILL COME WITH THE LOCAL ELECTIONS IN MAY. ALTHOUGH THE RESULTS OF LOCAL ELECTIONS ARE NOT USUALLY REFLECTIVE OF NATIONAL

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ELECTIONS, A CONSENSUS HAS THE SNP RECORDING SIGNIFICANT GAINS, PRIMARILY AT THE EXPENSE OF LABOR. MAXWELL CANDIDLY POINTED OUT THAT WHILE THE SNP WOULD VIGOROUSLY CONTEST THE LOCAL ELECTIONS AND WOULD MEET WITH CONSIDERABLE SUCCESS, IT WAS NOT IN THE PARTY'S BEST INTERESTS TO GAIN CONTROL OF PROBLEM AREAS LIKE GLASGOW AND DUNDEE, WHICH, BEING ALMOST UNGOVERNABLE. WOULD CAUSE DIFFICULTIES FOR ANY PARTY IN POWER. AT A TIME WHEN PUBLIC SPENDING IS DECREASING. HIS COMMENTS LEND CREDENCE TO OTHER REPORTS THAT THE SNP IS ACTUALLY LIMITING THE NUMBER OF CANDIDATES IT WILL FIELD TO ENSURE IT DOES NOT WIN A MAJORITY.

5. CONTACTS WERE IN GENERAL AGREEMENT THAT AN ELECTION IN THE NEAR FUTURE WOULD PROBABLY BRING A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT BACK TO POWER IN WESTMINSTER. IN SCOTLAND. THE SNP WOULD BE EXOECTED TO PICKUP 10 - 20 SEATS, MOSTLY AT THE EXPENSE OF LABOR THOUOH MAXWELL INDICATED THEY MIGHT WIN A MAJORITY OF SCOTLAND'S 71 SEATS. THE LIBERAL OPPOSITION TO CLOTURE ALSO INCREASED THEIR VULNERABILITY. THE LABOR GOVERNMENT, DESPITE
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THE REAFFIRMATION OF ITS COMMITMENT TO DEVOLUTION, IS PERCEIVED AS INCAPABLE OF REVIVING THE BILL IN THE CURRENT PARLIAMENT. DESPITE A STRONG SPEECH BY MICHAEL FOOT AT THE WEEKEND CONVENTION OF THE SCOTTISH COUNCIL AND THE AVOIDANCE OF ANY DIVISIVE RESOLUTIONS ON DEVOLUTION (SEE REF. B), THE LABOR PARTY IN SCOTLAND SEEMED TO BE A DISPIRITED PARTY ON THE DEFENSIVE. MOST LABOR SUPPORTERS WE SPOKE WITH AGREED THAT THE SNP WILL TAKE SOME LABOR SEATS, THOUGH ASSESSMENTS ON THE EXTENT OF THE DAMAGE VARY.

6. COMMENT. WHILE WE SHARE THE SURPRISE OF OUR CONTACTS AT THE LACK OF DISCERNIBLE EVIDENCE OF A "SCOTS BACKLASH", WE WOULD PREFER TO AWAIT DATA FROM THE MORERELIABLE ORC POLL PUBLISHED BY THE SCOTSMAN BEFORE SAYING THAT IT HAS NOT TAKEN PLACE.

7. THERE IS NO REASON, HOWEVER, TO CHANGE OUR EARLIER VIEW, SHARED BY VIRTUALLY ALL OBSERVERS, THAT THE SNP'S POLITICAL POSITION IS GREATLY ENHANCED. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THAT PARTY'S POLITICAL MATURITY AND SOPHISTICATION OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS HAS BEEN REMARKABLE, AND THE SNP IS NOW CLEARLY PART OF THE SCOTTISH ESTABLISHMENT. HOW IT WILL ADAPT TO THESE NEW CIRCUMSTANCES AND RECONCILE ITS OWN INTERNAL DIFFERENCES, HOWEVER, REMAINS TO BE SEEN. ALTHOUGH THE DEVOLUTION BILL SEEMS TO BE DEAD FOR NOW, THE PROBLEM OF ACCOMMODATING SCOTTISH NATIONALISM REMAINS, AND IT IS NOT EASY TO BE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT PARLIAMENT'S ABILITY TO MEET THE CHALLENGE.

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